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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000843

SENSITIVE
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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CHANGE TEXT)

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SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY STEINBERG'S SEPTEMBER 27, 2009 CONVERSATION
WITH POLITICAL DISSIDENT DR. PHAM HONG SON

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (SBU) September 27, 2009; 3:30 pm; Home of
Dr. Pham Hong Son; Hanoi

12. (SBU) Participants:

U.S.

The Deputy Secretary
Ambassador Michael Michalak, U.S. Embassy, Hanoi
Scot Marciel, EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary
Christian Marchant, Political Officer (Notetaker)

VIETNAM

Dr. Pham Hong Son

SUMMARY

13. (C) In a wide-ranging conversation with one of Vietnam's best-known political dissidents, Dr. Pham Hong Son, the Deputy Secretary elicited thoughtful commentary on Vietnam's future and the prospects for democratic change. B Son affirmed that he was optimistic, but stressed repeatedly that while the United States could assist, fundamental change would only come through the actions of individual Vietnamese citizens. B Son criticized stepped-up government actions to suppress dissent, which he attributed to anxieties in advance of the January 2011 Party Congress and to interference from China, but he insisted that repression would serve to undermine the Party's legitimacy. B B Son called on the United States to take advantage of Vietnam's 2010 chairmanship of ASEAN to press Vietnam to live up to its international commitments. B END SUMMARY.

The Party Congress and China

14. (C) Asked to provide context for the current crackdown on political dissent, B Son argued that the Party intended to quell dissent leading up to the next Party Congress in January 2011. Echoing a commonly held view, Son also placed a portion of the blame on China, stressing that nearly all of the dissidents, journalists, and bloggers who had been detained in recent months had spoken out regularly against Chinese investment in Bauxite mining projects in the Central Highlands and China's aggressive behavior in the South China Sea. B Son asserted that the suppression

of anti-China views, if not many of the specific arrests, had come on instruction from Beijing.

Repression Undermines the Party's Legitimacy

¶15. (C) Son asserted that when people challenge the authority of the regime it is a natural reaction for the regime to fight back. However, efforts to suppress dissent would ultimately undermine the Party's credibility in the eyes of average citizens. Son, himself once a member of the Communist Party, asserted that even long-time CPV members were losing faith and were increasingly disillusioned by the government's feeble efforts to defend Vietnam's territorial sovereignty against China.

"Optimistic but Not Too Optimistic"

¶16. (C) Son said that the current crackdown notwithstanding, there had been a growing awareness of the meaning of individual rights and civil society was growing. As evidence, he cited public outrage against Chinese involvement in bauxite mining projects in the Central Highlands. Son said that he was "optimistic, but not too optimistic," balancing his favorable assessment of societal trends with a conservative critique of Vietnam's youth, which he described as more politically aware but less civic minded.

¶17. (C) Asked about the impact of "new media" such as blogs, twitter, and Facebook, Son said that blogs had broken a "50 year silence" in Northern Vietnam. He noted that recently enacted restrictions on the ability of independent research institutions to publish findings critical of government and Party policies would have a negative effect, as evidenced by the closing of Vietnam's most prominent independent research organization, the Institute for

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Development Studies. Still, the Internet had done much to create an environment in which critical thinking would be circulated -- even if only online -- and that this was crucial to paving the way for more direct organizing for democratic change. The Ministry of Public Security understood the threat posed by new technology, Son said, noting that dissidents' phones were routinely tapped and email correspondence read.

What can the United States Do?

¶18. (C) The Deputy Secretary asked what the United States could do to help push for democratic change in Vietnam. Son replied that he could not provide a specific roadmap, but emphasized that U.S. efforts to engage Vietnam's government were very helpful in pressing the authorities to better respect the rule of law. Son characterized as positive Vietnam's decision, at the urging of the international community, to ratify international human rights treaties. Even basic trade agreements helped, since they prompted a greater understanding of and respect for the law. Son cautioned against expecting immediate results, but agreed that Vietnam's chairing of ASEAN in 2010 could provide additional opportunities to push for respect of the rule of law. Son said ASEAN's ability to reach consensus on the Terms of Reference on Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights was a positive development, though the new body still lacks substance.

¶19. (C) By contrast, Son said that Vietnam's recent Universal Periodic Review in Geneva had been disappointing. Son faulted Vietnam for refusing to accept recommendations from the United States and others to increase freedom of expression and derided as "laughable" the Vietnamese delegation's insistence that Vietnam held no political prisoners. He noted that during his own four-and-a-half years in prison, the guards had always referred to him as a political prisoner.

It's Vietnam's Fight

¶10. (C) Ultimately, however, fundamental change will only occur

through the actions of Vietnam's citizens, Son insisted. Absent this, no pressure from the United States or European Union would be effective. In this sense, Son emphasized that no social or political change can come without sacrifice and that Vietnam's dissidents must be prepared to withstand extreme difficulties, including harassment, arrest, or worse.

What's Next for Dr. Son?

¶11. (C) Noting that his three-year term of administrative probation -- house arrest -- had lapsed on August 30, Son expressed hope that the Vietnamese government would follow through on the promise, which it gave to the Ambassador in writing, that he would be able to receive a passport in order to travel to the United States to participate in a research fellowship sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy.

Michalak